

Part 7: The World and Words of Christmas

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We have a new short sermon series which will start in two weeks, but for the foreseeable future here at Sovereign Hope we will be working through the gospel of Luke. Today we will encounter the story of Jesus' birth. But what's remarkable about Luke's history is that the signature stories which occupy our imagination during the Christmas season seem to be presented as happenstance in his gospel.

If you ask most people, Christian or not, what the religious significance of Christmas is they would probably be able to tell you that it is about the birth of Jesus. From nativity scenes, to Christmas pageants, songs like "We Three Kings" and "Away in a Manger," stories of Inns turning away the pregnant Mary, and sheep and oxen standing idly by are from a Christian sense, seemingly what is most emphasized in the Christmas story.

However Luke, who has set out to write the largest account of Jesus' life we have in scripture, who also reaches the furthest back in Jesus' history than any gospel writer, who spends the most time focusing on Jesus' early life, and who includes the most intricate details of history spends all of forty-three words on the scene of Jesus' birth: **Luke 2:6-7**.

In John Bunyan's book *Pilgrim's Progress* the main character encounters a man named Talkative. Talkative knew all of the words to say about religion. He knew that Jesus was born, he probably could have told you that it was in fulfillment of prophecy, and he probably could have even debated with you about the actual timing of Jesus birth and how it wasn't actually in December. But despite Talkative's words and awareness, his heart was not struck by any of the things he knew.

For many of us, the story of Jesus' birth is a winning answer to Trivial Pursuit, or the substance of warm fuzzies during Christmas, but Luke wants us to see something more profound, more heart stirring, and more worship producing than a surface-level understanding of what happened at the first advent of Jesus Christ.

While Luke spends very little time on the events of Jesus' actual birth, he emphasizes two distinct perspectives. The first is the world into which Jesus was born, the second are the words when Jesus was born. The world at Jesus' birth and the words of Jesus' birth take center stage for Luke in hopes that we might better understand the realities at play that Christmas morning.

What we are going to do this morning is highlight not simply the story, but the significance of Jesus' birth. First in verses 1-11 we are going to see **The Humiliation of the High Places**, then in verses 10-14 we are going to hear the wonderful message of **The Harmony of Heaven and Earth**, lastly in seeing the response to this message we see **The Centrality of the Gospel Message**.

Let's begin by examining our first point today which is **The Humiliation of the High Places**. What I want you to notice about this passage as we read is how much attention is given to the world around Jesus, and we will then examine why this is significant and what effect it should have on us.

Read with me **Luke 2:1-11**.

So what you'll notice in this passage is an intentional progression and inversion which Luke wants us to see. What we have happening in 43 short words is the birth of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Wonderful Counselor and Mighty God. Yet he was not born in Caesar's Palace, but in a manger since there was no proper room for him. The heralds of his birth were not the royal messengers or powerful orators of Rome, but instead degenerate, uneducated shepherds.

Luke sets the contrast of this context by highlighting the ruler, Caesar Augustus, and his census. These censuses went out for two primary reasons. First it was to assess the tax value of the empire. It was to establish financial prowess. But secondly it was to count up the size of the Roman Empire to establish political significance, to brag in its numbers. Luke wants us to see this when he says that Augustus made a decree to census the whole world.

Now we know that he didn't census the whole world, but only the Roman Empire. But to the people living during this time, Rome was the world and Caesar Augustus was arrogant enough to think he was the ruler of the whole world.

It was under Augustus that the famous *Pax Romana*, or Roman peace, was established. Augustus inherited Rome in its peak. It was the military power of the world and further he established a building campaign which laid the foundation for many of the ancient wonders we see today. Augustus was the leader of the most lucrative, safe, and mighty super power of the day.

But Augustus called this census unknowingly according to the plan of God. Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth, but the census would have them go to Bethlehem. This would be insignificant, except for the fact that it was prophesied in Micah 5 that God's deliverer would come from Bethlehem: **Micah 5:2-3**.

Caesar may have thought himself to be the ultimate king, but God was using this man in order to bring about the world's true king. As Caesar attempted to assess the quantity of his people in order to tax them, the King of King's was being born in order to give his life for them.

But we also that after the birth of Jesus, another glimpse into Jesus' world. There were shepherds, outside the city, in the field, keeping watch over their flock, by night. Each word in that sentence progresses to add another level of insignificance to the narrative.

While God frequently chose to use shepherds as his prophets, and though Jesus is the chief shepherd, shepherds in this day were nearly as low as one could get on the social ladder. Luke's narrative descends the social ladder of the day: It begins with the ruling class of Caesar and Quirinius, next would be the merchants and priests of which we don't see any here, but then we get to the peasants of which Mary and Joseph would most likely belong, but after the peasants there is a category underneath them which far less people belonged to which was categorized as the "unclean and degraded."

This is the category which the shepherds were a part of, and they were a two-for-one. They were both unclean and degraded. Their job was of less social significance than peasants, and shepherds were considered so low that their witnesses was not even acceptable in courts. But they were also ceremonially unclean. The shepherds were not allowed to participate in many of the religious events of the day because they couldn't keep up with the legalistic requirements for washings. Yet it was to these lowly, unclean degenerates that the message of Jesus' birth was first proclaimed.

Rome had much fanfare in announcing significant events, but here the fanfare of Rome was bypassed for the fields of insignificance by worldly standards.

Luke's gospel is filled with these inversions of social significance and power. God is generally working and laboring among those whom the world casts aside. While our culture today loves this idea of social inversion we need to ask ourselves what it means for us in a distinctly Christian way. In the birth of Jesus, God embarrasses and shames the places of worldly significance and value. So what effect does it have in our hearts?

I would point out two things. First this humiliation reminds us that all of us come to Jesus with nothing. None of us come to Jesus as Caesars or even saints, we come as shepherds, unclean in our sin, separated from the presence of God and having no value on our own. This is true for anyone who comes to Jesus!

To those who think they have everything they need in order to receive the grace of Jesus, it is you who miss the wonder of Jesus. The good news of Jesus is for those who realize that apart from him they are standing in darkness on the outskirts of everything good. And that the redemption of all who come is not that we go from the pasture to popularity, but that we hear and receive the message of the gospel. That our value is defined by our doctrine.

But secondly, this humiliation reminds us of how we ought to humbly recalibrate all of our hopes. It has never been clearer than in this text that the hope of God circumvents the traditional hopes of the world.

Now this takes conscious effort even for those who are Christian. Because what we tend to do is not to neglect God as the source of hope, but instead to baptize human hope as the method of God's hope. For instance this past month on the same Sunday, one church in Texas invited former President Donald Trump to speak, and another church in LA invited a democratic congresswoman to speak. Both turned a Sunday service into a campaign rally of political hope for a nation.

I'm not against Christians being engaged in politics. I'm not against republicans or democrats being inside Christian churches together. But what we should be cautious of is taking pulpits meant to exclusively boast in Christ the king and to subtly place our hope in human kings.

Consider the Lord's warning in **Jeremiah 9:23-24**.

Our hearts this side of heaven will always wrestle with the temptation to find our salvation in the might of Caesar or our comfort in his Kingdom. But here we see so clearly that Christian hope is hope in God exclusively, and that hope in God often flies in the face of what is powerful in the world. Here in the birth of Jesus, Luke wants us to see the humiliation of the high places so that we might see ourselves, and our savior as God would have us.

But now I want to focus on the message the angels declared to these degenerate shepherds. Read with me: **Luke 2:8-14**.

So here we see something that is not new for us in the book of Luke. We see the appearance of an angel, the fearful response of the human, and a comfort which displaces that fear.

But though we saw in Zechariah's story the promise of the gospel to come, in Mary's story we saw the promise of God with us, here in the desolate fields we here the clearest message of the gospel so far in the book of Luke.

The theme of this gospel message is our second point today: **The Harmony of Heaven and Earth.**

In the birth of Jesus Christ, the great divide between the Lord of Heaven and the men of earth was being bridged. This is the good news of the angels.

The angel opens up by saying literally: "Fear not for I am gospel-ing, good news-ing, to you great joy for all the people." What is that good news? That unto you is born this day a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

This message is so significant not only for us today, but for those who heard it that day. Jesus is given three titles here in this text. He is a savior, he is Christ which is the Greek word for the Hebrew title of Messiah (this was a religious word), and he is Lord. The word "Lord" up until this point in the book of Luke was used exclusively in regards to God so here also is a proof of Jesus' divinity. But also the idea of "Lord" at this point was a distinctly political idea specifically to those who were Greek.

Caesar Augustus had begun to call himself at this point: *Dominus et Deus* (Lord and God).

Those two titles were so significant for him because it attempted to stress his power both as a divine god, but also as a human Lord and ruler.

But it is here, in a manger, declared not to the counsel of Rome, that God's messiah, the Lord who is God was born. For Greeks longing for a ruler, here was a child born. For Jews looking for their God, here was the messiah king. The God who was the divine above, had sent his son to be the Lord of those below.

The Greeks, like us today, saw social standing and influence as the most powerful indicator of one's true self. So it was a hindrance in the early church for Greeks to believe that the God who created the cosmos, the second person of the Trinity who sustains creation itself, would come to earth as a human baby.

For the Roman culture which was ripe with demi-gods and men like Augustus who claimed to be god, if one wanted to be worshipped they should reveal themselves in something majestic. They should be like the sun, or the moon, or a mythical beast breaking into creation.

Athanasius, who pastored many of these early Christians responded to these hindrances by saying: If Jesus came only to be put on display, then he could have chosen something more majestic. But, he said, "The Lord came not to be put on display, but to heal and to teach those who were suffering."

Creation, the sun, the moon, the air and the elements did not need to be redeemed for they never sinned. But humans, made in the image of God, there was the problem—sin had broken all of humanity. So Jesus, being born as a human, took to form and substance of the ones who he desired to heal and to save.

That is the significance of Christ who is the Lord, and is our savior. Jesus came from heaven to earth so that those burdened and bound by their own sin might be set free by this savior. What we see here is

that if you want to know who Jesus is, if you want to understand his position, you must see his salvation. Jesus is the radiant King because he is the saving Lord.

At this message, heaven itself exploded. Look back at **Luke 2:11-14**.

What is the response people have to the message of Jesus? It demands that the armies of heaven lay down their arms for a moment and declare the praises of what this means. Here we see that the message of this savior is a display of God's glory in heaven. This news is heavenly news. This son born was the son in whom God the Father drew deep delight.

Yet this message was of earthly significance: "Peace on earth among those with whom God is pleased."

The beautiful result of the work of this messiah, is that through his salvation from sin the God in heaven would be pleased with his children here on earth. When sin stands between us, there can be no peace, but when Jesus takes our sin in his body, peace with God is restored to all who are saved by him.

Here in the message of the gospel is a peace that out reaches the *Pax Romana* of the day. Where Augustus reveled in his peace, here the harmony Jesus brought between God and man was peace unparalleled. Consider what Paul says in **Romans 5:1-2**.

If you've ever wondered if there was an ability for you to have peace with God, if there was ever anyone who could accept you knowing your constant sins and weaknesses, here is the message of peace with God through Jesus Christ where we get not only peace, but pleasure with God the Father.

Sometimes we like to divide the idea Jesus as God and Jesus as Lord, but if Jesus is to be our savior he must be both messiah-God and ruling Lord. In this is peace, peace which causes the heavens to rejoice.

But now we turn and examine the response Luke's world has to the message of Jesus' birth. As I read this passage I want you to pay attention to the centrality the message of the angels plays in the following narrative. Read with me: **Luke 2:15-21**.

So here we see our final point this morning: **The Centrality of the Gospel Message**.

Now I want you to put yourselves in the shoes of the shepherds here in this text. They were sitting in a field where in the middle of the night, out of nowhere, an angel appears and the glory of the Lord shown around him, and he speaks to them.

Then, after this, a multitude of angels appears, also out of nowhere and begins the world's greatest praise chorus.

But what is amazing is that the sign which the angel's gave the shepherds was a baby. An ordinary baby, wrapped in ordinary clothes, born in an ordinary manger.

If you wanted a sign, which would you prefer to get? The heavens opening, a glorious light show, and an angelic symphony? Or a small person wrapped up burrito style?

I know for me, what would stand out most and provide me the greatest conviction would be the miraculous event that night in the field. But what stood out to the shepherds was not the messengers, but the message. They left with haste to see the baby.

Specifically to see, vs. 15, this "thing," the Greek word being *rhema* which can be translated at word or saying, which was made known to them. The rhetoric of the angel was so powerful that it changed the perspective of the shepherds so much so that they were more amazed at the beholding the baby than beholding the heavens. The infant was the wonder!

Why? Because if what was just declared to them was true, there was nothing in all the world more spectacular, more radiant, more praise worthy, more astounding than that little infant baby wrapped in cloths and laid in a manger.

Furthermore, if you were the shepherds and you had to communicate what just happened to you, what would you say?

Most of us would describe in detail the disruption of the still night, the radiant glory which we saw, the multitude of angels which they witnessed but I want to slow walk us through what the shepherds saw as of utmost significance that night. The glory which they saw was glory heard in the gospel message.

Verse 15: The shepherds went to Bethlehem to see this *rhema* (saying), which the Lord has made known to them. Vs. 17, when they saw the child, they made known to them the *rhema* (saying) which had been told to them concerning this child. Vs. 18, and all who heard it (being the saying which was told to them) wondered at what was told to them. Vs. 19, but Mary treasured up all these *rhemata* (words/sayings/things), pondering them in her heart. Vs. 20, and the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told to them.

What was of powerful witness to the shepherds, of wonder to the bystanders, or treasure to Mary, and of glory and praise was not simply what happened, but that it happened according to the message God gave.

They did not merely worship at what they saw and heard, they worshipped that it happened just as God had communicated to them.

You see our eyes need help to see things as we should. From a human perspective the message of the angels would be buried under the superficial events of the night. Human eyes on their own would write a different story of the evening. But if we are given ears to hear God's description of these events, we marvel at it the way we should.

Human eyes would find all the splendor in the field, and find the baby to be just that. But when God through his word shows us, tells us, communicates to us the significance of what our eyes see, we worship what we hear.

What Mary treasured up in her heart was the message of the angels, "That born that day in the city of David was a savior, who is Christ the Lord." When we sing "O, Holy Night" we rightly remind ourselves, "O hear the angel's voices," that the scene at the manger is nothing without the message of the manger.

You see the glory of the Lord showed up in that field. That's what Luke said. But by the end of this passage the glory of the Lord is seen most fully in the message fulfilled in Christ the Lord. There are two places in the Old Testament where God's glory showed up most visibly. The first was Mount Sinai where God spoke to his people and entered into a covenant with them. The second was in the tabernacle and temple where God dwelt.

But it's here in Jesus Christ where the covenant word of God, and the presence of God display his glory in an unparalleled way. This unique combination is what the whole Old Testament pointed towards.

Look with me at Isaiah 40 where God's glory and God's word come together in the gospel of Jesus Christ: **Isaiah 40:3-5.**

If you want to see the glory of God, then you must realize that God's glory is most clearly revealed in the message of Jesus Christ, who is our savior, Christ the Lord. That's it. There is nothing more compelling, more witness worthy or worship producing than that. If you want to stand in awe, if you want to be Christian this story humbles ourselves to put on the eyes of faith. It calls us not to see the world as our eyes see it, but to hear the hope as God declares it. It requires us not to behold the angels, but to believe the message.

This is our first point of application in closing. The message of the gospel bids us to go to Jesus. Just as was declared to the shepherds, he has come to you.

When the shepherds heard the message and saw what seemed like the greatest sign in the world in heaven's chorus, they didn't sit back and say: "This is good, I believe." But instead their belief in the angel's message, their belief in the good news just declared to them, moved them to leave behind their vocation and to go see Jesus. They left their livelihood for an infant. How much more is it our privilege to leave behind our lives, our false idols and our incomplete saviors not for the infant in a manger, but the risen king in resurrected glory?

This message you hear today means nothing if you do not come to Jesus. Belief moves us towards him. It cannot sit idly by, but demands that we go to Christ before we return anywhere else.

But secondly, for those who have left everything and come to this savior who is Christ the Lord, do you ponder the reality of this word in your heart.

Those who heard it wondered. Mary treasured it and stored it up. The shepherds considered everything in light of God's fulfilled word and it lead them to worship and glorify God.

The beauty of the gospel is that when we rejoice in it at all, we rejoice in the promise power of God's word. When we come to God and experience peace and pleasure, we rejoice that it is exactly as it has been told to us. God's word in the gospel proves true.

When we choose to put away sin and find it possible by the power of the Holy Spirit, we rejoice that it is exactly as it has been told to us. God's word in the gospel proves true.

When we put on lives of holiness and righteousness and find it to be the greatest feeling of freedom, we glorify God that it is exactly as it has been told to us. God's word in the gospel proves true.

When we worship Jesus and find him to be immensely satisfying, good news and great joy to all people, we celebrate that it is exactly as it has been told to us. God's word in the gospel proves true.

So let us today, this morning, conclude our time by worshiping not only that Jesus has come, but that Jesus has come to be and to do just as God has said he would. And in this message is great joy for all people.